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Fiscal conservatives offered at least 67 amendments to House appropriations bills, targeting close to \$140 million total in specific earmarks, according to data compiled by the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense. That estimate excludes four amendments that were blanket attempts to remove dozens of projects from certain spending bills.

At the same time, Republican leaders' individual earmarks did not suffer the scrutiny of floor debate called for by Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and other fiscal conservatives.

"Congressman Flake does try to achieve some kind of parity between the parties when choosing what earmarks to cut," said Flake spokesman Matthew Specht. "He doesn't single out specific members for what earmarks he chooses to challenge. He looks at the projects themselves."

House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) has never sponsored an earmark, according to his office. But House GOP Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.), GOP Conference Chairman Adam Putnam (Fla.), and Republican Policy Committee Chairman Thaddeus McCotter (Mich.) emerged unscathed from this year's appropriations battle even though they all had several projects on the books.

The Democratic leadership was not as lucky. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) had at least three of her projects targeted, while Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and Whip James Clyburn (D-S.C.) had an earmark apiece up for debate. Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.) came under the spotlight for a project he co-sponsored with Rep. Melissa Bean

(D-Ill.) to refurbish the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago.

But it was Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), known for his fondness for earmarks, who was the prime target. Flake offered at least seven amendments to cut more than \$48 million in funding from Murtha's projects. That includes \$39 million dedicated to the National Drug Intelligence Center, a project that several lawmakers have complained about.

Murtha's office declined to comment for this story.

Specht said earmarked funds tend to flow to the majority party's leaders as well as to members of the powerful Appropriations Committee. He added that several top Republicans were targeted last year because the majority party tends "to have a larger pool of earmarks to choose from."

For example, a Flake amendment targeted one of Dennis Hastert's (R-Ill.) earmarks when he was still Speaker.

Bills that individual Democratic sponsors proposed faced a total of 43 amendments that would have struck earmarks, while lone GOP-member-sponsored measures saw only 15. At least four earmarks with bipartisan sponsorship came to a debate, with sometimes close to a dozen members signing onto one project.

Several top Republicans, however, did face scrutiny. Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.), ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Bill Young (R-Fla.), and Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) all had some of their projects come up for debate.

And only one lawmaker, a Republican, saw one of his earmarks end up on the cutting-room floor. Rep. Patrick McHenry's (R-N.C.) \$129,000 request to help fund a Christmas-crafts store was rejected by a House vote after Flake challenged the spending. All other amendments either failed by recorded or voice vote.

Among budget hawks, Flake led the way, offering 47 amendments to cut projects from spending bills. Rep. Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas) and Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) both offered 11 amendments each, while Rep. Scott Garrett (R-N.J.) sponsored one. Three of Campbell's provisions targeted several, if not all, earmarks in specific spending bills.

In addition, Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, sponsored an amendment to strip all earmarks from the Labor and Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations bill. Obey answered "present" to remain a neutral observer.

"I want the House to choose whether it wants to proceed with earmarks or not," said a frustrated Obey when he spoke on the floor about his amendment. "I invite you to put up or shut up, and make up your mind."

The provisions by Campbell and Hensarling, meanwhile, were part of a larger coordinated campaign by the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC) to improve transparency behind the funding measures, said Brad Dayspring, RSC spokesman.

"Hundreds of amendments were drafted that focused on earmarks requested by members of both parties," said Dayspring. But he added that the "terms of the [unanimous consent] agreement for each bill prohibited every amendment that was drafted to come to the floor."

Specht said he did not know whether Flake would target Republican leaders' earmarks next year, but reiterated that he has done so in the past based solely on their projects' merits.

"It seems a bit premature to begin guesswork on next year's appropriations process," said Dayspring. "Who knows how badly Democrats will have attempted to overspend and overtax by then?"

One conservative action group has taken note of the debate. The Club for Growth has assembled a report card of all the House roll call votes for the earmark-cutting amendments and believes the issue is in play for the 2008 elections.

"Our PAC [political action committee] is definitely going to make this a campaign issue," said David Keating, the Club's executive director. "People hate to see their money wasted."

He also said several members of Congress are "on the radar" due to their poor scores on the earmark votes, including Reps. John Doolittle (R-Calif.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.).

In addition, the Club plans to issue a report card for the Senate after following votes for earmark-cutting amendments offered to that chamber's appropriations bills.

"I think we hit a nerve with this thing," said Keating.